

# *Sketch*

---

*Volume 31, Number 1*

1964

*Article 13*

---

## Boy On A Bicycle

Bernice Black\*

\*Iowa State College

Copyright ©1964 by the authors. *Sketch* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).  
<http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch>

# Boy On A Bicycle

Bernice Black

## **Abstract**

Nemanya wheeled down the road, his bike making a hot wind. This had been the third dry summer in a row, and smoke from forest fires over-cast the sky, dimming the sun but only intensifying the heat...

Unctuous civilization,  
Turgid with inundations of the white lamb blood,  
Swoops down to lick its staring wounds:  
The rubble of another  
Cyclotronic  
Absolution.

While underfoot, time  
Shuffles a tattered rhythm  
Across the washed sands  
Of a more lucid grief.



## Boy On A Bicycle

*by Bernice Black*

NEMANYA wheeled down the road, his bike making a hot wind. This had been the third dry summer in a row, and smoke from forest fires over-cast the sky, dimming the sun but only intensifying the heat. He pumped up a hill; the bottles rattled in the bike basket. Every ten yards a little yellow mark slid by. The paving crew had been through this

summer resurfacing the road. As he caught his breath going downhill the glint of a bottle in the ditch stopped him. He braked his bike, careful not to jog the bottles, and laid it on its side. This made the nineteenth bottle this afternoon. The basket would hold 25, and that meant a quarter.

The heat of his exercise caught up with him whenever he stopped, and made him glad to go again. He mounted gingerly, keeping his balance, and started off downhill. A car whizzed by, tooting. No one he knew, but it was a Manitoba license. Probably some fishermen going on up north for the big season. Nemanya rode by parched wheat fields and small herds of skinny cows. A woman called out, "Hi, Nemo! How's your mom?" "Fine, thanks." The wind carried his answer back. He picked up two more bottles. What would he do with the quarter? He wondered. Mom always said he'd got it on his own time and could spend it as he pleased, but Dad never protested if Nemo offered it to him; and he knew there were a lot of things they needed. But it would be nice to save it and maybe go to a movie. Maybe he should get something nice for Mom. Oh well, after all, he worked all day, why not keep it himself?

He noted the school as he passed it. It always looked better in the summer, all boarded up; and it meant that in a minute he would be at the cemetery, then soon home again. This summer it had been his job to tend the family plots in the cemetery. He had kept flowers going through the whole summer and was very proud of it. Another car passed, crossing to the other side of the road to do so. From the States, this one was. His thoughts ran back to the cemetery. Really it was three cemeteries, because there were three different churches in it. But they were all Orthodox. Nemanya's cousins went to a different church from him. Which church didn't matter in the cemetery though. All the graves looked the same, with the double barred cross on top; but there were small fences separating the congregations. His grandparents were all dead, but he could remember them, and he liked to think how pleased they would be with the flowers. He could take the time to stop today.

He looked up. To his dismay, the car from the States had stopped right opposite the cemetery. A tall man and woman were walking down the rows of graves, stooping to read in-

scriptions on the markers. The man had a camera, and he was taking pictures of the cemetery. Nemanya saw a bottle in the ditch near the car. Should he stop for it? What if the people saw him? Well, he could pretend not to notice. He pulled off behind the car and hurried down to get the bottle. When he came up out of the ditch the woman was walking toward him, waving. "Oh, yoo-hoo," she called. "Excuse me, boy, do you live near here?"

Where did she think he lived? 500 miles south in Winnipeg? "Yes'm."

"Can you tell us anything about this cemetery? We've never seen one like it before." She was a large woman, wearing slacks and a plaid jacket. She had his bike by the handle now, trapping him.

Nemanya scuffed his toe in the hard dirt on the roadside and muttered, "Yes'm. It's our church's."

"Oh, good. William! Come here! This little boy knows all about it." Her husband looked up and started toward them.

"Do you live on a farm?" she asked.

"Yes'm."

"Do you help with the chores?"

"Yes'm."

"Do you have brothers and sisters?"

"Yes."

The man came up. He had gray hair and was wearing a white shirt. Nemo's Dad always wore a blue shirt to church, but Uncle Vilnis had a white one. Nemo looked down again.

"Hi, son. What church is this?"

"Orthodox."

"Oh?" He looked at Nemo. "You aren't Greek. Is it Russian?"

"No, sir, Ukranian." Nemo felt very hot. He was conscious of his filthy jeans and faded shirt, and he reached up to push a damp lock of hair off his face.

"What kind of schools do you have up here?"

"I go to the county school."

"Run by the Church?"

"No sir." What did it matter to them what school he went to?

"Why are there those fences in the cemetery?"

"There's three different kinds of churches."

"How long have your folks been over here?"

"Over 100 years."

"Oh, really? Say, do you have good farming up here? The soil looks pretty bad."

Nemo lifted his chin. "We have good soil. It's quite rich. Been a dry year, but the soil's good and we have a good farm."

The woman walked over to the car door. "Are you going to be turning those bottles in?"

"Yes'm." Nemo kicked the edge of the blacktop.

"Well, here, then." She leaned over the front seat and pulled out a six-pack of Coke bottles. "Take these. We won't have a chance to turn them in."

"No thanks, ma'm." He pushed his bike by them and shoved off.

"Sure you won't take them?" The man called after him.

Nemanya didn't answer. He pumped hard, rattling the bottles. The wind whipped tears across his cheeks. Why did they have to stop him? Why couldn't they ask somebody else. He rode past a bottle in the ditch, not stopping.

## Almost

*by Paul Kratoska*

I read a poem that almost made it.  
It told of love in almost perfect rhyme,  
And I read it to my almost love  
At the almost perfect time . . .  
And almost made her.

I went home almost happy  
With what had almost come to be,  
But I saw the writing on the wall:  
The sum of your almoses equals your all.